

Black, Gay, and Proud

by Craig G. Harris

While sorting through my mail one evening in late January, I came across the ubiquitous manila envelope. The P.O. Box return address was ink-stamped in the upper left corner, and my name and address were neatly typed on a white label attached to the center.

The envelope contained a letter from Gil Gerald, president of the National Coalition of Black Gays, welcoming me as a new member of NCBG. And while I couldn't agree more emphatically with the slogan on the letterhead, "As proud of our gayness as we are of our Blackness," I couldn't help chuckle at the dichotomy between the almost militant proclamation and its camouflaged confidential wrapping. I was reminded of a joke that my friend Jim once told me: "What's the difference between a black kid and a gay kid? The black kid doesn't have to tell his parents."

Begrudgingly, I gave Jim points. Being Afro-American has always been a source of pride for me. Growing up in the 1960s, I benefited from the aftermath of the civil rights movement and the explosive momentum of the Black Power movement. Both at home and in school, a strong sense of racial identity and knowledge of a collective history was instilled in me.

My gayness, however, was not a cause for immediate pride. Rather, it was the cause of a great deal of emotional confusion. The Stonewall uprising was history by the time I heard of it; likewise, I had little knowledge of the gay movement before my college years. I found no identifiable role models to draw this information from.

I read Gerald's letter again and looked over the NCBG materials. The package included a copy of the organization's bylaws and a membership card. Not figuring any practical use for the card, I thought of humorous possible benefits. Maybe it would entitle me to "twofers" for Philip Blackwell's next play, or free passes to the next Diana Ross concert.

I decided that this was the gay equivalent to a "hang-out card." You'll recall, the hang-out card is the one that your teen peers threatened to revoke whenever you wore uncool clothes, spoke uncool jargon, hung with an uncool crowd, danced with an uncool counterpunch rhythm, or played basketball like a retard. Laughing aloud, I remembered how I'd protected my somewhat cool status despite the fact that I damn near flunked Phys. Ed. my senior year of high school. The laughter stopped abruptly when I recalled that my two closest friends from that era invalidated my card when I came out in college.

I was fortunate that this was not a typical reaction. The majority of my nongay friends have remained supportive and the bonds between us have become even stronger. Yet I never stopped searching for a support group and the role models which would help me to establish a knowledge of history and a sense of pride as a gay Afro-American man. The NCBG membership card, if nothing else, symbolized finding that support system and those role models within a structured national organization. This was an official welcome into a collective of men and women whose sexual proclivities and ethnic identity have caused us to share certain needs, concerns, and goals.

NCBG is certainly not the first nor the only fraternal organization for third world gays. The Committee of Black Gay Men deserves posthumous acknowledgment for touching the lives of so many politically active brothers who participated in their consciousness raising groups. Blackheart Ltd., whose membership shares a common interest in publishing Afro-American gay literature, is to be commended for its public education efforts. There's also the Corduroy Club, the Committee, Salsa Soul Sisters/Third World Women Inc., Asian Lesbians of the East Coast, and the Committee for the Visibility of the Other Black Woman.

The existence of this type of organization is not a post-Mattachine phenomenon. Afro-American transvestites were gather-

ing to throw elaborate drag balls in the nation's capital in 1893 and in St. Louis in 1907, according to reports by Dr. Charles H. Hughes. These were secret societies, fraternities if you will, whose social needs prompted political action.

The need for these clandestine organizations for Afro-American gays is quite apparent when we look at the historical maltreatment of this double minority. Were the case of Jan Creoli, an Afro-American sodomy offender sentenced in 1646 to be publicly choked to death and burned, an isolated incident, there would be little cause to raise issue regarding the impact of coupling racism with homophobia. However, according to records of the U.S. Department of the Interior, by 1880, over 50% of those jailed for crimes against nature were Afro-American. More than 100 years later, Afro-American gays remain the "invisible men" in both the gay and Afro-American communities. The forms of discrimination range from tacit disapproval to fag bashing. No wonder our need for support organizations is still strong.

Over the years, a more sophisticated socio-political climate has allowed us to come out in varying degrees without threat of public burnings, yet the prospect of ostracism, harassment, and economic impotence causes many to react like endangered turtles, protecting their homosexual vulnerability with impenetrable shells.

The gay community mirrors the broader society. The feelings of violation experienced by many gay white men when encountering heterosexist discrimination are largely due to an innate belief that, as white men, their civil liberties are a guaranteed birthright. This unconscious illusion of supremacy promotes racism and misogyny, rather than eliciting empathy for victims of discrimination based on race or sex.

The gay white male sensibility is questionable at best. It has allowed the formation of a post-Stonewall "old boy network" complete with restricted private clubs that deny entry to women and third world men, periodicals which rarely depict positive

nonwhite images within their editorial or advertising formats, and a political machine which often overlooks people of color while fighting for equality and liberation.

In the Afro-American community, there is always a place for the homosexual. The strong tradition of the extended family holds a highly esteemed position for the bachelor uncle or spinster aunt. These are often the family members who, because they have lesser financial responsibilities, can assist in the rearing of their siblings' offspring. Afro-American families relate well to homosexuality—as long as they can turn their backs on the issue. But often when the homosexual family member decides to be political, or obvious in other ways, the family becomes confused, frightened, or disgusted by the display.

Straights have a firsthand knowledge of discrimination in its various forms, and thus have a difficult time understanding why anyone would want to bear an additional cross. As far as they're concerned, no one has to know you're gay until you tell them. So, for God's sake, be quiet about it—leave bad enough alone. But, as fair-skinned Afro-Americans who were able to pass for white chose to make their ethnic identity clear, many Afro-American gays are finding it necessary to deny assumptions of their heterosexuality, realizing that "passing" is a manifestation of self-hatred akin to psychobiological suicide.

Unlike the equivocal security afforded by remaining closeted, the benefits of disclosing one's sexual identity are manifold. It is a crucial step in personal development, it facilitates fraternal connections, and it allows for public education. When we truly are "As proud of our gayness as we are of our Blackness," it is evident. We act as role models, not only within the gay Afro-American community, but as active members of the two larger communities. By publicly acknowledging our identities, we force others to contend with our special social/political/legal needs and concerns, and to recognize the many contributions we have made, individually and collectively, to American society. ■

